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NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION: OFFICE TREATMENT OF NAMES

The Estonian Law on Place Names

Paper submitted by Estonia**

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INTRODUCTION

First attempts of standardizing Estonian place names were purely linguistical. In the 1920's and 1930's recommendations on spellings of names were given by the Academic Mother Tongue Society. A simple guiding rule that was adopted that time was that names ought to be written in the way they are pronounced. This meant that numerous corruptions of Estonian names used earlier e.g. in German or Russian contexts were not to become accepted spellings in Estonian.

In 1938 the first legal act on place names was adopted that determined the principles of standardization and the competence of state bodies in approving names. The act also devised estonianization of "foreign" place names. The Place Names Board was formed in conjunction with the Ministry of the Interior. One of the Board's first tasks was to revise the list of local administrative units that was completed the same year. Other plans of the Board were not carried out because of the occupation of Estonia in 1940.

During the Soviet period the use of geographical names was regulated by more moderate acts. The last decree on names was issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in 1981. The decree contained generally-worded recommendations that "geographical, historical, national, environmental and other local conditions and also the wish of the local inhabitants" be taken into account when approving new names. Another document called for consideration of the "tasks of communist education of citizens" thus legalizing the changes of many place names by the Soviet authorities.

First acts in Estonia after re-establishing the independence concerning geographical names were the Language Law (1995, earlier version in 1989) and the Law on the Administrative Division of the Territory of Estonia (1995). Many aspects remained unclear though, especially the question of who was entitled to approve official place names for different features.

When the Governmental Place Names Committee was formed in November 1994, one of its main tasks was to compile a comprehensive new draft law to deal with the subject. A working group was set up that worked for two years and completed the draft by April 1996. Parliament adopted the Law on Place Names on 11 December 1996.

The law aims at concentrating all major aspects of names standardization into one single act. In compiling the law the expertise of other countries (especially Norway and the Place Names Act, adopted 1991) as well as recommendations of the United Nations on standardizing geographical names were taken into account. The law has three main chapters dealing with competence and procedures in approving place names, requirements to be considered, and the use of place names.

STANDARDIZATION OF PLACE NAMES

The names of administrative units and territorial units (populated places) within parishes are approved by the Government. Local governments are responsible for naming parts of administrative units.

Minister of Communications is entitled to approve names of railway stations, ports, navigation aids, airports and -fields, state roads and aquatorial features. The Minister of the Environment has the right to name physio-geographical features listed in national cadastres or registers. The Minister of Culture approves names for memorial sites and antiquities preservation areas. Before approving the names the ministers will ask the opinion of the local governments concerned. In all cases the opinion of the owner is requested.

To advise the Government and to coordinate the names standardization activities the Place Names Board is envisaged in the Law. The Board has a greater role with respect to the ministers approving names. In the case of local governments the opinion of the Board is asked only in certain conditions.

An Office for Onomastic Expertise is appointed by the Government to give expert statements in the questions of place names and to conduct task research if required by names authorities.

REQUIREMENTS TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN STANDARDIZING PLACE NAMES

The place names of Estonia are in the Estonian language. Exceptions are allowed that are historically and culturally motivated. The names are written in the Roman alphabet, names from other writing systems are transcribed according to official tables. The orthographical rules of Estonian have to be taken into account when standardizing Estonian names but the spellings may reflect local (dialectal) features. The spelling of a name will have to be unified if used in different contexts (for different features).

Regarding the choice of new names the law recommends names with long-standing local usage and those with more historical and cultural value. While planning new areas the old names of the locality should be used as widely as possible to preserve the cultural continuity of the landscape. Memorial names are not allowed in the lifetime of the person whose name is proposed. No numbers or other non-word signs must be approved as names.

Changes of official place names are restricted by the law that requires motivated decisions. Names may be changed to avoid identical names, to correct inaccurate spellings, to replace existing official names with names rooted in local usage but e.g. renaming streets and giving them memorial names would require the consent of the Minister of the Interior who would ask for the opininon of the Place Names Board. (Giving memorial names to new streets with no previous names is not restricted.)

MINORITY NAMES

By referring to non-Estonian place names that are historically and culturally motivated the Law on Place Names guarantees the use of minority names. In Estonia this would primarily apply to names of Swedish or Russian origin used in areas where the minorities have lived. A special clause of the law stipulates that the linguistic situation of the year 1939 has to be taken into account when deciding minority names. After that year, with the beginning of the war and the following mass migrations the

local population structure changed significantly. Although most of the Swedes left their areas during the war and some formerly Estonian-populated territories have now been settled by later immigrants, the law gives priority to historic names.

A new feature in the law is the provision for parallel names. Where there have been historically mixed linguistic areas two official names may be approved, one in the language of the local majority and the other from the local minority. Estonian names may stand first if they have become rooted and are nationally known. Parallel names are not allowed in the case of administrative or address units and cadastral units.

USE OF PLACE NAMES

This chapter of the law deals with the use of names in texts, signs, documents, etc. When a place name (including parallel names) has been approved, the exact full spelling must be used in all official contexts.

An article of the law also determines the principal elements of the address format.

The National Place Names Register is envisaged that will store all official names. The place names data of the national cartographic database shall serve as the basis for the register. The data are public.

As many place names used on maps in the strict sense of the law would remain unofficial, there is a clause stating that before entering such names onto the Basic Map of Estonia, the opinion of the Place Names Board will be asked.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the law has been applied for a relatively short time most of its regulations seem appropriate and timely. It was not easy to combine practical and legal aspects in a law with cultural and linguistic regulations that often have to be in the form of recommendations rather than prescriptions. The following next years will show the validity of such an approach.